

# YORK COUNTY-QUALITY OF LIFE

AT HOME IN HISTORY YORK COUNTY'S MELLOW AMBIANCE REVEALS IN THE PAST WHILE LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



BY MARY BURNHAM

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A military helicopter sets down in a field near the National Park Service Visitor Center in Yorktown. Excited children in black tricornered hats rush up a hill to watch. Across the field, bicyclists ride single file on the roads of Yorktown Battlefield.

Inside the visitor center, preparations are underway for the restored tent George Washington used during the siege of Yorktown. Outside, a sign directs pedestrians to a short, shaded walk past the Victory Monument to the waterfront community of Yorktown. There one finds a brick-paved Riverwalk along a swimming beach, a handful of restaurants, and quaint narrow streets with Colonial-themed shops, art galleries and antiques.

Here at this eastern point of the Historic Triangle, daily life runs a notch or two slower. There's time here to reflect upon the momentous event that occurred here—the siege of British troops that ended the American Revolution. A small taste leaves a visitor wanting more.

As Yorktown revels in the past, York County, the 108-square mile municipality, of which Yorktown is but one community, looks to the future. There's room to grow, in terms of housing and business. Large swaths of green space are preserved in national parks, military bases and watersheds. Citizen surveys give local government high

marks, both for responsiveness and for attention to public safety, education, culture and the arts, while still keeping taxes and growth manageable.

A fiscally-sound government, quality schools, a variety of housing options and lots of open space make York County a great place to live, says Jim Noel, director of economic development. History is the ingredient that enhances all these.

"The ability to interact with history on a daily basis makes this a pretty special place," Noel says.



The Riverwalk runs along the York River's swimming beaches and intersects restaurants and narrow streets lined with Colonial-themed shops, art galleries and antiques.

## History

A few days after Sept. 11, 2001, a small crowd gathered at Yorktown's Victory Monument for a poignant National Day of Prayer. The Fifes and Drums of York Town marched up Main Street dressed in their red uniforms and tricornered hats.

As dusk fell, about 100 people passed around candles, held them in silence, then joined together in spontaneous song: "God Bless America."

Members of the corps range from 10 to 18 years old, and provide a musical backdrop for all sorts of historical events in the area. Formed for the nation's Bicentennial in 1976, they have performed at the Smithsonian Institute, before the General Assembly, and have opened for the Virginia Symphony. In summer they perform weekly at the visitor center and at the Victory Monument, the county's gathering point for both solemn Veteran's observances and festive Fourth of July fireworks. The monument was completed in 1884 to commemorate the victory at Yorktown and memorialize those who perished.

The Yorktown Battlefield driving tour, exhibits and activities at the NPS Visitor Center and the Yorktown Victory Center tell the story of the siege that ended with Lord Cornwallis' surrender to General George Washington.

Soon the Riverwalk will extend from Yorktown to the Victory Center, linking all these sites for the pedestrian explorer. The Watermen's Museum, also located on the Riverwalk, preserves and interprets the tradition of fishing, crabbing, oystering and clamming by which a hardy few still make their living. While piers on the York River once hosted steamboats from Baltimore, now cruise ships visit about 16 times a year.





As part of the Yorktown Revitalization effort, the county recently purchased Nick's Seafood Pavilion and 12 parcels of land nearby. County officials maintain that the restaurant, a landmark for more than half a century, will continue as part of Yorktown, even if it is moved. The founders, the late Nick and Mary Mathews, were active in promoting the Yorktown Foundation's efforts, in particular the building of the Yorktown Victory center. When she died in 1998, "Miss Mary" left \$300,000 worth of property to the county, the Naval Weapons Station and the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters.

## Economy

History and the related tourism is a significant economic generator in the county. Government employment has also long been a primary element in York County's economy. The county's largest employer is the federal government. The Naval Weapons Station/Cheatham Annex employs 2,800 including 1,072 civilians. County leaders are working to diversify and broaden the tax base. Economic

development is a priority for the county. One of the reasons for this is the large number of non-taxable parcels in York. Forty percent of the county's land is owned by the National Park Service, military, or is watershed property.

York County's Office of Economic Development markets several commerce parks to high-technology manufacturing companies and related enterprises. Noel says he'd like to see more companies like Cybernetics, founded in 1978 and headquartered in York County. Cybernetics designs and manufactures disk and tape storage solutions worldwide.

To capitalize on the remaining land for development, the county is considering extending infrastructure through a public/private partner-

ship to a 250 acre tract with immediate interstate access. Another strategy being developed is having the plans approved for a "virtual building" in the York River Commerce Park.

York County's percentage of retail sales on the Virginia Peninsula has dramatically increased during the 1990's. That trend is continuing as Wal-Mart has two supercenters under construction in the county. With an established Lowes Home Improvement Center and a Wal-Mart on the way, the Lightfoot Corridor, located in upper York County, is shaping to be the next regional retail destination.

## Local government

York County is governed by a five-member board of supervisors that hold regular meetings twice a month and have frequent additional work sessions. Cable channel 46 broadcasts their meetings, as well as public hearings and meetings of the Planning Commission.

Keeping in touch with county residents is a priority. *Citizen News* is published quarterly, mailed to each household and is available on the county's Web site ([www.yorkcounty.gov](http://www.yorkcounty.gov)). The Web site features an A-Z Citizen's Guide covering topics from Animal licensing to Zoning. The county also mails a copy of the annual report to each household and posts it, along with the budget, on the Web site.

The county makes it easy for residents to give their feedback. Those who can't get to a budget hearing can still have their comments entered into the official record by calling the 24-hour hotline and leaving a message. Residents can fill out a Citizen's Survey at any time on-line as well. A broad survey of County residents is taken every two years.

In the last survey (December 2000), 95.6 percent of York County citizens reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with county services and the quality of life.

It's no surprise that keeping taxes down is a prime objective. The York County real estate tax rate has remained unchanged for eight years at 86 cents per \$100 value. A lodging tax, rather than property tax, is used for the promotion of tourism. Receipts pay for services like the free Yorktown Trolley and improvements along the waterfront. The county's land use plan projects a cap on the population of about 85,000. The rate of growth is around 1.3 percent a year.

ABOVE: Members of the Fifes and Drums of York Town range from 10 to 18 years old, and provide a musical backdrop for all sorts of historical events in the area.

LEFT: The Waterman's Museum, seen above to the left being transported to its new location, is located on the Riverwalk. The museum functions in preserving and interpreting the deep tradition of fishing, crabbing, oystering and clamming by which only a few make a living at today.

### QUICK FACTS

**Official Web site:** [www.yorkcounty.gov](http://www.yorkcounty.gov)

**Public Information Office:** 890-3300

**Population:** 60,400 (July 1, 2002 estimate)

**Population growth:** 1.3 percent

**Median Family Income:** \$56,275 (1998 figure)

**Education:** 60 percent of the workforce age 25 and older has some college education.

**Property taxes:** \$.86 per \$100 of property value.

**Mean sales price of housing:** \$165,000 (2000)

**New housing starts:** 554 in 2001

**Largest employer:** Naval Weapons Station







BELOW: The Village Shops at the Kingsmill are just a sampling of the flavorful boutiques and specialty shops operating in York County.

RIGHT/BELOW RIGHT: Reenactments of Lord Cornwallis' surrender to General George Washington during the Revolutionary War bring to life Yorktown's historical heritage.



## Community

York County's two libraries offer varied events and services, from free tax assistance to author book-signings. The York County Office of Virginia Cooperative Extension holds landscape clinics in various neighborhoods, and the York County Historical Committee gives free tours of historical sites.

The Senior Center of York offers a full schedule of activities. One month alone might bring a health fair, a spring prom, an out-of-state bus

trip, computer classes and an AARP Mature Driving course, called 55 Alive. Ongoing are the Meals-on-Wheels program, blood pressure checks and nutrition and fitness programs.

These kinds of services are made possible through the efforts of many volunteers. Last year alone, more than 2,300 volunteers gave nearly 100,000 hours of service to the county.

## Neighborhoods

York County has 71 Homeowner Associations. This year the county recognized outstand-

ing neighborhoods for achievements like beautification, safety and neighborhood cooperation. The three winners are representative of the variety of York County neighborhoods, from military housing near Langley Air Force Base to upscale professional developments near Williamsburg.

The well-established community of Queen's Lake won the award for beautification. It's a labyrinth of quiet country drives, lined with dogwoods, azaleas and mature hardwoods. The large wooded lots, many on the water, and a clubhouse with marina, pool and tennis courts make this a very desirable place to live. Dwellings range from modest ranches to estate-like dwellings with lions perched on the gates.

York Point won the award for Neighborhood Cooperation and Spirit, recognizing activities like delivering Thanksgiving baskets for the needy; and Williamsburg Commons won for Neighborhood Safety.

## Education

York County's school system has been recognized nationally. In 1996 Money magazine included it in the 100 best school systems in the county relative to the cost of housing. For eight years running, the school system has won the School Match - What Parents Want Award, given to only 15 percent of the nation's schools. Forty-four percent of the teachers have a master's degree or better. York High School has an International Baccalaureate program and an honors program.

The county's 19 school buildings are all in some state of being upgraded. Within the next six years, all five high schools, the four middle schools and three-quarters of the elementary schools will either be new or completely renovated.

## Health Care

York County doesn't have its own hospital, but that may change in five years. Williamsburg Community Hospital has purchased 83 acres in the county for construction of a new, regional hospital. York County does have numerous physicians and medical clinics.

## Safety

A low crime rate coupled with an award-winning Department of Fire and Life Safety make York County a safe community. The department has a reputation for creative measures. For exam-

ple, they have installed solar-powered emergency telephones on remote county roads. Residents receive a magnetic refrigerator pouch that can hold critical patient information.

## Recreation

There are numerous ways to access the county's 200 miles of coastline. The National Park Service has pull-offs along the Colonial Parkway overlooking the York River. Public marinas and boat ramps provide access to creeks and inlets. The county operates neighborhood parks and



recreational fields. Perhaps the most popular spot is the public beach in Yorktown.

The county is home to one private golf course. A second course is in the planning phase, with completion scheduled by December, 2003. It's located on state-owned land off Route 199 near Water Country USA, the mid-Atlantic's largest water park, and King's Creek Commerce Park. Hawk's Nest Golf Development Company has been selected to build the 18-hole public golf course.

New Quarter Park in the Queens Lake Subdivision opened to the public on weekends in April. The 545 acres were acquired by York County from the U.S. government. It has a picnic shelter, volleyball court, softball field, a floating pier on Queens Creek, and three nature trails. Most of the land remains natural marsh and woods.



## Transportation

Interstate-64 runs the entire length of the county. Newport News/Williamsburg International Airport is within a few miles, and Richmond and Norfolk International airports are within an hour's drive.

The free Yorktown Trolley operates April through October, stopping at seven Yorktown locations about every 30 minutes. Narrated sightseeing and dinner cruises, as well as fishing trips, depart from the Yorktown waterfront.

## The Arts

The Gallery at York Hall opened in April this year in York Hall at Main and Ballard Streets. Themed exhibits will change every two months or so, and volunteers will assist visitors with directions and information. Closed Mondays. (890-4490, [www.yorkcounty.gov/cyc](http://www.yorkcounty.gov/cyc))

On the Hill Cultural Arts Center offers on consignment the work of about 80 local artists. 121 Alexander Hamilton Blvd., 898-3076.

The Celebrate Yorktown Committee presents a free series of outdoor summers concerts (890-3877, [www.yorkcounty.gov/cyc](http://www.yorkcounty.gov/cyc)), and the Fifes and Drums performs in public regularly as well (898-9418, [www.fifes-and-drums.org](http://www.fifes-and-drums.org))

Annual Events: Watermen's Heritage Celebration is held the third Sunday in May at the Watermen's Museum. The highlight is the workboat races, when working watermen get to show off their boats.

Other annual events include the Fourth of July Celebration and Yorktown Day Oct. 19. The Christmas holidays kick off the first Friday in December with a candlelight street procession, Christmas tree lighting, lighted boat parade and bonfire on the beach. The following day is the Christmas Home Tour. **HR**